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ABSTRACT

Statements of opinion from black and white citizens about elementary, secondary, and college-level reading instruction and learning programs are discussed. Relevant objective data are listed for each point in an attempt to clarify what is known from research about the status of reading instruction and the needs of learners, both black and white. However, it is pointed out that data at the college level are rather limited. The author found the following common threads of concern at each level: (1) the systems now being used do not adapt well to the ever-changing needs of society or the individual, (2) the individual is finally becoming a major concern in education today, and the accountability of schools to individual progress is a definite trend, (3) black disadvantaged children taught by a sincere, well-trained teacher can make normal progress in school, and (4) teachers are individuals and a variety of approaches and materials are necessary for them to do their best in education today. A bibliography is included. (Author/CM)

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Black, White and Reading

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This paper discussed opinions from black and white sources about reading instruction and learning in the Elementary, Secondary and College level programs. These opinions were supported by more objective data collected to give some perspective to the different opinions expressed at each level.

Some common threads of concern were evident at each level discussed. They were presented in the summation of the paper and were as follows:

1. The systems now being used do not adapt well to ever-changing needs of society, politics, community or the individual.
2. That the individual is finally becoming a major concern in education today; and the accountability of schools to individual progress is a definite trend.
3. Black disadvantaged children taught by a sincere, well-trained teacher can make normal progress in school.
4. Teachers are individuals and a variety of approaches and materials are necessary for teachers to do their best in education today.

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Black, White and Reading

Dr. Gary D. Spencer

When trying to collect data for this topic, it was obvious that there was much discussion and many points of view but very little objective data regarding differences of reading programs, reading instruction, or reading learners among black and white children. Most data was primarily opinions relating to particular, social, political, and educational philosophy. This paper will be organized into several sections, each to be covered as a separate unit in itself. These sections are as follows: Elementary Grades (1-8 inclusive), High School Grades (9-12 inclusive), and the College Levels.

Elementary Grades

We know more about reading at the elementary level than we ever have in history. Robinson, Harris and Serwer, Stauffer and Hammond and Hahn and others have given us data from the first and second year studies in reading. (1) (2) (3) (4) We have data available coming from Titles I, III and V of the ESEA Act of 1966. (5) We have much sociological data surfacing regarding the effect of environment on learners but most of this has yet to be evaluated or implemented into instructional programs.

Generally there seem to be some observations and opinions we must look at closely.

Black Opinions.

1. Black children are not receiving equal instruction to white children.
2. Evaluation of black children is based on tests standardized on white middle-class children.
3. Instruction is not relevant to the communities the black children come from.
4. The needs of the black and poor communities are rarely considered much by schools, teachers or administration.

When discussing these points we must take each and look at it from several points of view.

That segregation in both the north and south has been a fact and even with recent court decisions will continue to be a social, economic and educational problem for many years has been indicated by many. (6) (7) (8) In the southern states where the financing of schools is mainly a state function, with local support used to supplement or enhance the local school program, the recent racial mix-quota system has created much controversy, apprehension and withdrawal of credence in (9) the public school system. We have had approximately 800 new private schools spring into existence in the months of December thru the end of February in the deep south, with virtually no control over the quality of these schools and moves being contemplated by the state legislatures of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida to allow state funding of these schools. The average tuition charged per student in these new schools runs approximately $250.00 per year with the staff composed primarily of retired or non-certified personnel. These latest developments may cause supplementary bond issues to run into grave trouble. This is at a time when schools are being closed and there is much need of additional money to convert and repair older facilities as well as construct new plants to acoomodate the changes brought about by the new racial mix orders. In other parts of the country, mainly the large cities, school systems get bigger, more expensive and usually less relevant (10) to the communities especially as the poor (mainly black) are not able to move to the middle-class white suburbs. This type of segregation is just as insidious as in the south and runs into the same financial, social and educational problems as in the rural and southern schools.

The tests, texts and instructional techniques are based on program needs or teacher needs rather than individual needs. Thus we have Dick and Jane sitting on a "veranda" (11) (12) (13) in a basal text with instructions so thorough that the teacher doesn't even have to think about how to make the lesson more appropriate to the ghetto child.

With intelligence tests standardized on middle-class white populations, we do not recognize that black students may have innate abilities equal to others. Even if we knew that verbal intelligence's of blacks were different from whites, just what should that mean in the way of instructional philosophies? Don't we also have children with visual problems, broken homes or red hair? (14) (15) (16)

The school-community needs of blacks in large cities are often decided by white school boards, white superintendents and white teachers who respond more to city politics rather than community needs. Thus it inevitably is easier to find the "best" material and the "best" techniques to fit their own needs than to fit minority children or community needs.

White Opinions:

1. The needs of the black community should be met but so should the needs of their own communities. (17) (18)
2. Certain essential truths of education should be passed on from one generation to the next.
3. Materials and instructional techniques which provide the most good for the most children should be used.

When discussing these points, it is obvious that these statements are neither wholly right nor wrong, but may at times be either.

Objective data relevant to the above issues was hard to obtain but does point to some areas for research.

a. We do have data confirming that no one way of teaching, nor any one material is the best for all students. (19) (20)

b. We do know that the teachers who are interested, dedicated and sincere do better than those who teach "by the Book." (21) (22)

c. We do know that the child's motivation to learn is related to both the environment and the way the teacher approaches teaching. (23) (24) (25)

d. We do know that smaller school systems tend to respond to local communities more than large school systems do. (26) (27) (28)

e. We do know that individualizing instruction, while not a panecea, can allow more differences to be compensated for. (29) (30) (31)

f. We do know that disadvantaged children (black or otherwise) can learn at almost normal rates if teaching environment is optimal. (32) (33)

g. We do know that compensatory programs can and do work and fail, but we do not know much about why they work or fail. (35) (36) (37)

h. We do know that reading levels in predominantly black schools prior to Title I were approximately two years below the reading levels of similar type white schools. We know there has been at least one grade level increase in reading in those systems in the south where no previous compensatory programs existed.

i. We do know that 50% of our nation's youngsters read 1½ years or more below their potential.

j. We know that 25-30% of the school population receives 80% of the failing grades in this country.

Secondary Programs

Black Comments:

In addition to the previous comments at the Elementary level, we have additional comments that:

1. The textbooks and materials are too (38) (39) difficult, biased and irrelevant to needs of youngsters.
2. That teachers care little about the kids or their learning. (40) (41) (42)
3. That most curriculums are primarily designed for the college bound student when most may not go. (43) (44)

Discussion:

While all the comments above are valid for black students aren't they equally true of high schools for white students, especially in larger cities? It is true that the materials are too difficult or non-relevant but also equally true for non-college bound white students.

White Comments:

1. We must maintain quality education, for these young people are tomorrow's leaders.
2. There is a minimal level of competence necessary in order to be high school educated.
3. High school preparation is a must for entry into college.

Objective Data:

a. We suspect that 11th grade high school black students across the country generally fall two to three years below the levels of white students in reading ability.

b. We do know that from the hard-core unemployed that the majority are below the 7th to 8th reading levels. (45) (46) (47) (48)

c. We do know that journeyman programs for carpenters, masons, electricians, etc. require at least a 10th grade reading level in order to read the appropriate texts. (49)

d. We know that vocational programs have been mostly unsuccessful because of a lack of reading ability among those in the programs. (50) (51) (52)

e. We know that the black student dropout percent rate is approximately double that of white students.

f. We know that the potential of black students for job success with proper training is the same and in many cases better than for white students, providing he is a functional reader. (53)

g. We know that there are many high schools in the country, especially in large cities, that do not make much attempt to consider individuals or their differences. This is true of both black or white students. The pervading atmosphere of the Liberal Arts is still very strong though not very relevant to students.

h. We do know that the middle-class white child is usually better equipped through his environment to succeed in schools geared to middle-class white materials techniques and concepts.

i. We do know that relevant programs, teachers and materials can reduce drop-outs and cause learning to progress to take place in any type high school program. (54)

j. We do know that when parents are concerned the high school programs are more successful.

k. We do know that black students are searching for their own places as a part of our society. (55)

College Level:

With the advent of student militancy, Black Studies programs, open enrollment programs and special scholarship programs, there has been much focus on the black student at the college level.

Black Comments:

1. Black studies are necessary for both black and white understanding of the African culture.
2. Since a college degree is related to job selection then schemes for limiting black enrollments should be abolished, i.e., open enrollment.
3. Since the black student has been undereducated at lower levels, remedial and compensatory programs should be available. Changing of some curriculum requirements has also been asked for.

Some White Comments:

1. Quality of education for college students, black or white, must be maintained.
2. Students are here to learn from the curriculum - not to change it.
3. Students are the curriculum - relevancy is the most important element.
4. College is the place for due deliberation of serious matters, without pressures from local, political, economic or social sources. While change may be slow, it is usually well thought out, logical, and generally good for society.

Data Available:

While the data in this area is rather small, it is an ongoing process and answers should be forthcoming soon.

a. Success in high school subjects is not related to success in the same college subjects - excepting foreign language.

b. Open enrollment freshman students would be expected to read on an average of two years below regularly admitted freshman students. (56)

c. The textbooks generally used in college courses are usually higher in readability level than the reading levels of open enrollment students. (mostly black) (57)

d. Serious reading problems rarely succeed in college studies. (58)

e. Remedial or compensatory programs in college, while admirable, may not be very successful in helping students with serious reading problems.

f. Black studies programs are well accepted by both white and black as determined by current enrollment. (59) (60)

g. In spite of the focus on the black students, no appreciable numbers of black students have been admitted to our colleges and universities. (Only ten colleges graduated blacks in Psychology degrees last year.) (61)

h. One-half of all black students are enrolled in thirty-four public and private black colleges. (62)

i. The better prepared or more able black students are receiving large scholarships and teaching fellowships at major universities. Thus giving a false impression of students in them. (63)

j. The black colleges and universities are losing top students and top faculties to major white institutions who are starting black studies programs. Thus faculties of black colleges may decay.

While this paper has attempted to create somewhat of a dialogue between black and white reading, it is felt that only the surface was scratched. There are a few threads that run all the way through.

1. Many of the difficulties now being experienced are that the system is "the system," that is the school structure has been and is now not very adaptable to the ever-changing needs of society, politics, community or the tremendously wide ranges of individuality. Yet with the population and knowledge exploding it is natural to try to apply broader and more complex systems to our exploding individual needs. We must realize that the more we rely on general systems approaches to teaching children to read and learn, the more we must miss.

One very evident need is to somehow get local communities closely involved in the local school activities. Just as teachers are now becoming well prepared to make school decisions and thus more militant, the community must decide what its schools are for, but how much they are willing to pay for such services must take a back seat. It would seem that larger financial structures (preferably United States Government but at least on state levels) must be applied to relieve the pressing financial problems of urban and rural systems alike. But the educational decisions must be made almost on a per school basis in order for the programs to succeed.

2. It would appear that the individual learner is finally coming into focus after many long years of delay. The process of evaluation of the effectiveness of particular programs is much needed. The teacher, school and programs must begin to experiment and be accountable to the amount of progress made for each child in light of his basic abilities. Accountability should definitely be a trend to be recognized in programs in the near future.

3. To be a black, disadvantaged child should not deter the thought that he has ability to progress and that the proper type of instruction by a good teacher can modify, if not entirely compensate, for the child's weakness, just as a pair of eyeglasses or a hearing aid can compensate for a physical weakness.

4. We must recognize that teachers are also individuals, and that a sincere, dedicated and knowledgeable teacher in the proper school setting can have as much or more impact on the lives of children than their parents. Providing the proper tools for handling many types of individual learners is already possible with today's technology, research and materials.

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